



ELN ceasefire could ease environmental degradation in Colombia

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A lasting environmental peace will mean tackling the underlying drivers of conflict in Colombia, many of which are linked to land and resources.



A mosaic of degraded forest in Caquetá Department, southern Colombia in 2020. Rural insecurity, armed groups and corruption have conspired to accelerate forest loss in the country. Peace is not a panacea, but it is a pre-requisite for slowing forest loss. Credit: SIMCOBA

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Colombia's president Petro has signed a six-month ceasefire with the ELN armed group, James Osbourne examines the environmental benefits that could follow in the event of a lasting settlement.

Making peace with the ELN

On 9 June, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) armed group signed a six-month ceasefire with the Colombian government, following months of talks in Havana. The agreement is due to enter into force in August.

The new Colombian government is in the midst of an attempt to conclude its decades-long internal conflict, and a deal with the ELN forms a key part of its wider strategy. The ELN was established in 1964, initially advocating a composite communist ideology of Marxism-Leninism and liberation theology. Its early leadership focused its efforts on Colombia's rural poor in response to high levels of societal inequalities in the country. In recent decades, the group has agreed to intermittent ceasefires and peace talks but was not part of the 2016 peace agreement between the government and FARC.

The ELN has grown significantly in recent years. Historically, it has been involved in severe environmental degradation, therefore a bilateral peace settlement is important for sustainable development in Colombia.

President Gustavo Petro's election in June 2022 was regarded as watershed moment in recent Colombian history. Heralded as a potentially transformational personality in the decades-long Colombian conflict, Petro inaugurated a policy of 'total peace', placing ambitious multilateralism at the heart of negotiations with *all* willing militia groups. The ambitious strategy constitutes a radical departure from previous attempts to demobilise a complex web of quasi-criminal paramilitary organisations.

The idea of a 'total peace' is a chimera of sorts. That an immediate and permanent cessation of militia violence can be instituted in Colombia belies the complexity of this multi-actor conflict. Colombian militias are eminently astute decision-makers and the trade-offs accompanying the acceptance of a negotiated settlement are carefully assessed. For example, peaceful, demands-orientated settlements must exact a stronger pull for militia groups than the continued, extra-legal economic exploitation of natural resources.

Environmental exploitation: an alternative strategy to peace?

In the early months of the Petro presidency, a significant spike in violence was recorded across Colombia as militia groups, seeking to strengthen their strategic position in the anticipation of peace negotiations, battled violently for greater control of both territory and criminal

peace negotiations, justified violently for greater control of both territory and criminal enterprises. These most recent confrontations bear witness to the ever-changing dynamics of the Colombian conflict, as well as to the external factors influencing inter-militia competition.

For example, in the aftermath of the 2016 peace treaty with the FARC, the ELN subsumed former FARC-held territories including Catatumbo and Chocó into its rent-generating enterprise, and absorbed the FARC-run narco-trade it once vehemently rejected. Given that the ELN's territorial expansion and extra-legal profit boon occurred as President Juan Manuel Santos attempted to strike a peace deal with the militia group, it would seem that the tangible benefits to be gained from a continuation of the conflict proved more attractive than those to be gained from its settlement. Indeed, though negotiations with the ELN had been ongoing for several years, there is a perception that the ELN's significant growth, in both territorial and financial terms, had emboldened it to resist government overtures on the conclusion of a peace treaty.

Faux environmentalism versus resource exploitation

Even as the current round of peace talks in Caracas and Mexico City that led to the deal exhibited tentative signs of progress, the destruction of Colombia's environment continued unbridled. The ELN has a contradictory relationship with the environment. On one hand, its platform is based on, and committed to, the protection of Colombian natural resources from predatory multinational corporations. On the other hand, the ELN itself has perpetrated serious environmental crimes. For example, attacks on oil pipeline infrastructure by the ELN have historically been posited as forms of anti-capitalist environmentalism, despite the tremendous damage wrought.

Indeed, the ELN is likely to have produced greater harm to the environment through its attacks than it has protection through its activism. If one considers the rents to be obtained through the extortion of multinational corporations, such activism comes to possess greater clarity of action. The bombing of oil pipelines has caused severe harm. For example, a suspected ELN attack in 2019 on a pipeline in the Norte de Santander province caused a significant environmental disaster after the oil spread into nearby waterways, most significantly the Catatumbo river. This account is, however, one among many thousands. In the last decade alone, the state oil company Ecopetrol has recorded more than 1,000 explosions on its five oil pipelines. Ecopetrol's Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline alone has suffered more than 1,500 attacks in 33 years, spilling almost four million barrels of crude oil.

Though the destruction of oil infrastructure has been a trademark tactic of the ELN for decades, since 2016 the organisation has also become associated with Colombia's spiralling deforestation rates. In areas where FARC once operated, deforestation was partly regulated. However, the demobilisation of FARC, in tandem with a weak state presence in rural areas, allowed the ELN,

and other groups, to encroach upon and exploit Colombia's rainforests. The chief driver of deforestation is land clearance for cattle farming, but logging, gold mining, and coca have also contributed.

Cattle ranching and logging constitute perhaps the most insidious causes of deforestation, given their opaque status and ability to feed into legitimate supply chains. Land for *all* these activities is, however, obtained illegally and the profits generated enable the continued operation of militia outfits, perpetuating conflict. In a shift from his predecessor, Petro has pledged that his government would focus their deforestation policy on the corrupt elites, rather than the rural poor.

Since 2016, deforestation rates have been phenomenal. Between 1990-2016, more than six million hectares of forest was cleared; this leapt to almost 225,000 hectares in 2017 alone. Rates have fallen somewhat since then but the country lost more than 170,000 hectares in 2020. The ELN is not exclusively responsible for such activities; indeed, in some localities, the ELN has reportedly prohibited practices associated with environmental harm, such as the use of backhoes in gold mining. Similarly, in the face of criticism, the ELN has sought to distinguish between 'indiscriminate logging' and 'timber extraction', the latter considered an ecologically sustainable practice.

For the most part, such rhetoric has not developed into tangible policies, and in many instances, the ELN permits deforestation if there is potential for income. For example, in the department of Norte de Santander, where deforestation has occurred rapidly in recent years, the ELN has restricted commercial logging but has agreed clear-felling contracts with farmers in exchange for compensation.

Context for a lasting peace

The ELN's hierarchical structure is unclear, which has rendered transparent negotiations with the organisation more difficult. Given its diffuse pecking order and the horizontality of its leadership in territorially dispersed zones of operation, a logical fear exists that a disarmament agreement may lead to the splintering of the organisation.

Fear of a split does focus greater attention on the validity of the group's ideational battle; as the income from illegal activities mushrooms, the group seemed less motivated by ideology, particularly if its questionable environmental platform was considered. The expansion of the ELN into Venezuela has been testament to this. The ELN's ability and confidence to operate in both countries comprises a significant challenge to its disbandment given the profitability and ease of cross-border criminality, placing significant pressure on Petro's 'total peace' policy.

Colombians are eager to see its internal conflicts end; about 70% of the population favour a peaceful, negotiated settlement. However, this does not mean such a reality is an immediate possibility. Nevertheless, the Petro government is approaching the settlement of the conflict with a shrewd cross-society perspective. For instance, the government negotiating team has not been limited to ideological allies of Petro; rather, it encompasses personalities from across the political spectrum. The presence of the President of the National Ranchers Association José Félix Lafaurie is indicative of this, given that Lafaurie could come to the table with the ability to grant much-desired ELN concessions as a member of the traditional Colombian establishment.

The Venezuelan government had also produced a *volte-face*, and appeared positively disposed to an end to the conflict between the Colombian state and the ELN. Venezuela has faced condemnation over the years for its collaboration with the ELN, and its cooperation is crucial to a peace deal. For instance, Venezuela can contribute to incentivising the reconciliation process, particularly in terms of logistical consultations with the ELN within its borders. In many regards, Venezuela's new stance reflects a nascent rapprochement between the two states after a decade of glacial bilateral relations. The Petro government's decision to re-establish diplomatic and security relations with Venezuela thus seems poised to generate positive results. This, for example, is indicated by the agreement of a trade deal between the countries in February. There therefore exists significant momentum to cement a deal with the ELN through cross-society and cross-national collaboration which, in recent years, has been absent.

Addressing the underlying drivers of inequality and environmental degradation

This round of negotiations with the ELN were typified by a solutions-orientated pragmatism, characteristic of the Petro administration. The ELN and the government prioritised measures seeking to alleviate the humanitarian fallout of the Colombian conflict on rural communities. The talks were not immediately concerned with the cessation of hostilities; rather, the negotiations constituted an exercise in confidence- and trust-building, a prelude to a productive negotiating relationship.

Agreement was first reached on the restitution of ancestral lands for indigenous communities, such as the Embera in western Colombia, with measures to improve living standards of those incarcerated in prisons, including many ELN members, following.

The third round of negotiations, which led to the ceasefire deal, were hosted in Cuba. During them, both the ELN and the Colombian government broadly articulated the need for a ceasefire to win the confidence of the Colombian people. Indeed, according to Pablo Beltran, the leader of the ELN delegation at the negotiations, the ELN regarded itself as a 'partner of the current government', demonstrating perhaps how the former paramilitary history and ideological leanings of President Petro may have positively influenced a political rapprochement.

However, there remained a gulf between the negotiations and the deal, and realities on the ground. Disputes between the ELN and other militias have wrought havoc in rural areas like Chocó and Arauca, where hundreds are believed to have died in 2022 alone. With the Colombian government in talks with 25 militia groups, its investment in its peace strategy is clear. What is less clear is whether the ELN's historic intransigence, and financial interests in the status quo, will prevent it from translating the six-month ceasefire into a lasting agreement.

While an ELN-wide ceasefire might halt oil pipeline attacks, deforestation will prove tougher to address. In light of the accelerated deforestation that followed the 2016 agreement with the FARC, the Colombian government must identify address how this can be avoided in the event of a permanent settlement with the ELN. Peace must emphatically consider how sustainable development can be undertaken in militia-held areas, and in particular, must seek to curtail the expansion of both cattle-ranching and coca production. Socio-economic inequality, decades-long land dispossessions, unclear land rights and corruption will be formidable barriers. To overcome them, the Petro government will require creative initiatives that put indigenous communities and small farmers at the heart of both economically self-sustaining and ecologically holistic environmental management.

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